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PARIS FOR WALLER; LONDON FOR TSOU

E.O. 12958: DECL: 05/09/2017

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SUBJECT: SYRIAN COURT SENTENCES FOUR MORE DISSIDENTS TO  
PRISON TERMS RANGING FROM THREE TO TEN YEARS

REF: DAMASCUS 437

CLASSIFIED BY: CDA MICHAEL CORBIN, FOR REASONS 1.4 B/D.

¶1. (C) SUMMARY: A SYRIAN COURT CONVICTED AND SENTENCED ON MAY 13 PROMINENT SYRIAN WRITER AND DETAINEE MICHEL KILO AND THREE OTHERS TO PRISON FOR THEIR SIGNATURE ON A 2006 DECLARATION CALLING FOR STEPS TO IMPROVE SYRIA-LEBANON BILATERAL RELATIONS. KILO AND FORMER COMMUNIST PARTY MEMBER MAHMOUD ISSA BOTH RECEIVED A THREE-YEAR JAIL SENTENCE; TWO OTHER SIGNATORIES WERE SENTENCED IN ABSENTIA TO TEN YEARS IN PRISON. FOLLOWING THE HARSH SENTENCING IN APRIL AND EARLIER THIS MONTH OF TWO OTHER POLITICAL PRISONERS, THESE JAIL SENTENCES WERE EXPECTED, PROVING ONCE AGAIN THAT THE SARG WILL BROOK NO INTERNAL CRITICISM OF ITS RELATIONSHIP WITH LEBANON. POST HAS INCLUDED DRAFT LANGUAGE FOR A POSSIBLE STATEMENT ON THE SENTENCING. END SUMMARY.

¶2. (U) ON MAY 13, THE DAMASCUS CRIMINAL COURT SENTENCED PROMINENT INTELLECTUAL AND WRITER MICHEL KILO AND FORMER COMMUNIST PARTY MEMBER MAHMOUD ISSA EACH TO THREE YEARS IN PRISON FOR SIGNING THE DAMASCUS BEIRUT DECLARATION, A DOCUMENT THAT CALLS FOR IMPROVED TIES BETWEEN SYRIA AND LEBANON. BOTH KILO AND ISSA WERE FOUND GUILTY OF "WEAKENING THE NATIONAL SENTIMENTS" AND "INCITING SECTARIAN STRIFE." UPON HEARING THE SENTENCE KILO PROCLAIMED THAT THEY WERE NOT GUILTY AND THAT THE SENTENCE WAS THE TRUE INJUSTICE. KILO FACES AN ADDITIONAL CHARGE IN SYRIAN MILITARY COURT OF "PROVOKING SOCIAL CONFLICT." THAT TRIAL WILL RESUME MAY 22. CO-DEFENDENTS SULEIMAN SHUMMAR AND KHALIL HUSSEIN, WHO HAVE FAILED TO APPEAR FOR ANY OF THEIR TRIAL DATES AND WHOSE WHEREABOUTS ARE UNKNOWN, WERE SENTENCED IN ABSENTIA TO TEN YEARS EACH. BOTH HUSSEIN AND SHUMMAR, THOUGHT TO BE IN HIDING OR TO HAVE FLED SYRIA, FACED THE ADDITIONAL CHARGE OF "PUTTING SYRIA IN DANGER."

¶3. (C) AFTER THE CRIMINAL COURT TRIAL, DEFENSE LAWYER KHALIL MATOOK TOLD ASSEMBLED DIPLOMATS AND JOURNALISTS THAT THE DECISION DEMONSTRATES THAT NO OPINION IN SYRIA IS PERMITTED ASIDE FROM THAT OF THE BA'ATH PARTY. DEFENSE LAWYER MUHANNAD AL-HASSANI SAID THAT THE STATE OF THE CORRUPT AND SUBSERVIENT JUDICIAL SYSTEM IS AN EXAMPLE OF WHY THERE CAN BE NO CHANCE FOR ANY TYPE OF REFORM IN SYRIA, WHETHER IT BE LEGAL, POLITICAL OR ECONOMIC.

¶4. (SBU) IN THE PACKED COURTROOM WERE SEVERAL WELL-KNOWN ACTIVISTS INCLUDING HEAD OF THE BANNED ATASSI FORUM FOR DEMOCRATIC DIALOGUE SUHEIR ATASI, FORMER MP AND POLITICAL PRISONER RIAD SEIF, POET AND INTELLECTUAL MAHMOUD SAREM, AND ALI ABDULLAH, WHO ALSO SIGNED THE DAMASCUS-BEIRUT

DECLARATION. THERE WAS ALSO A LARGE SECURITY PRESENCE. AFTER THE SENTENCES WERE HANDED DOWN THERE WAS A NEAR ALTERCATION AS SEVERAL SECURITY GUARDS PREVENTED RIAD SEIF FROM COMMUNICATING WITH MICHEL KILO. ADDITIONALLY, PRESENT AT THE TRIAL WERE DIPLOMATS FROM THE U.S., FRANCE, GERMANY, SWEDEN, ROMANIA, BULGARIA, AUSTRIAN, NORWAY, DENMARK AND CANADA.

15. (C) COMMENT. FOLLOWING SO CLOSELY ON THE HEELS OF THE HARSH SENTENCES FOR ANWAR AL-BUNNI AND KAMAL LABWANI VERDICTS (REFTEL), THESE JAIL SENTENCES WERE EXPECTED. IN ADDITION TO THE SARG SIGNALING ITS CONTINUED INTENT TO SUPPRESS ANY INTERNAL DISSENT, ESPECIALLY RELATING TO ITS HANDLING OF RELATIONS WITH LEBANON, SOME SYRIANS SPECULATE THAT THE HARSH SENTENCES ALLOW PRESIDENT ASAD AN OPPORTUNITY TO SHOW BENEVOLENCE BY POSSIBLY INCLUDING POLITICAL PRISONERS IN THE TRADITIONAL PRESIDENTIAL AMNESTY FOLLOWING THE PRESIDENTIAL REFERENDUM (SCHEDULED FOR MAY 27). ALTHOUGH THIS MAY BE LITTLE MORE THAN WISHFUL THINKING, THERE IS NO DOUBT THAT THE SARG CONTINUES TO TREAT HARSHLY THE ORGANIZERS AND SIGNATORIES OF LAST YEAR'S DAMASCUS-BEIRUT DECLARATION, JUST ONE MORE INDICATION OF HOW SERIOUSLY IT VIEWS ANY INTERNAL CRITICISM OF ITS RELATIONSHIP WITH LEBANON.

16. (C) LANGUAGE FOR A POSSIBLE DEPARTMENT HOUSE STATEMENT ON THE VERDICTS FOLLOWS: THE UNITED STATES CONDEMNS THE GOVERNMENT OF SYRIA FOR ITS HARSH AND UNJUST SENTENCES OF POLITICAL PRISONERS: MICHEL KILO, MAHMOUD ISSA, SULEIMAN SHUMMAR AND KHALIL HUSSEIN. THESE SENTENCES REFLECT THE SYRIAN REGIME'S CONTEMPT FOR HUMAN RIGHTS AND FREEDOM OF EXPRESSION, IN ADDITION TO THE SYRIAN LEGAL SYSTEM'S CORRUPTION AND LACK OF INDEPENDENCE. WE CALL UPON THE SYRIAN GOVERNMENT TO LIVE UP TO ITS OBLIGATIONS UNDER THE ARAB CHARTER FOR HUMAN RIGHTS, WHICH IT RATIFIED IN FEBRUARY 2007,

AND IMMEDIATELY AND UNCONDITIONALLY RELEASE ALL PRISONERS OF CONSCIENCE.  
CORBIN